

Voters will decide County Council's job description

■ Nov. 7 ballot question will ask whether the jobs are full time

County Council members decided Tuesday to let voters determine whether their jobs should be considered full time.

The council agreed 6-3 to place a change on the Nov. 7 ballot that that would define council mem-

Council Notes MARGIE HYSLOP

bers' jobs as full time in the county's charter.

The amendment, recommended by the county's Charter Review Commission, would not prohibit council members from being compensated for other work, but it brings to the forefront whether a candidate's outside employment interferes with his or her council work.

Council members are paid \$79,721 annually; the council president earns almost \$8,000 more.

They have said that their pay is not high for professional work in the county, that they work 40 hours or more on council business and that that makes it difficult to hold another job.

Three of four at-large members Nancy M. Floren of Garrett Park, Steven A. Silverman of Silver Spring and Michael L. Subin of Gaithersburg opposed putting the question on the ballot. Subin, who has a busy law practice, has said he believes that experience gained in an outside job brings an important perspective to the council.

Also, the council agreed not to reject a decision by County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) to move the Board of License Commissioners, which licenses retailers and enforces the county's liquor laws, under the Department of Liquor Control, which holds a monopoly on wholesale liquor sales in the county and operates some retail liquor stores.

Police will take over compliance checks at liquor stores.

The liquor board's executive director, Dennis Theoharis, said the move will improve efficiency by putting the board's staff under the department. Still, the board will retain its independence, Theoharis said.

Council President George L. Leventhal said he is worried about putting so much power in one place.

"For the most part when I hear about the county's liquor monopoly, it is not positive. ... I don't think the public will favorably greet what will be perceived as a strengthening of the county's liquor monopoly," said Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

Perez said it seems unwise to undertake a reorganization with the administration changing in four months.

New laws passed

In other business Tuesday, the council:

•Unanimously approved a law to require operators of all-terrain, off-road vehicles and off-road motor cycles or minibikes to wear helmets that meet standards set by the state Motor Vehicle Administrator and to use eye protection or a windscreen. The law bans off-road vehicles on county or private property without the permission and prohibits operating such vehicles on private property before 7 a.m. or after 8 p.m. It also prohibits riders younger than 16 without adult supervision. Penalties include fines from \$50 to \$500 and seizure of the vehicle. It requires sellers of the vehicles to inform buyers of the law.

The law does not apply to vehicles designated for farm use. The council had considered requiring the vehicles to be registered, but Leventhal said he would like to look into designating a riding range for off-road vehicles on public land in the county.

•Approved allowing homeowners to add a ramp or chairlift to the exterior of a one-family house as long as it is unroofed and open and does not exceed minimum design specifications in state and county code. The change relieves homeowners from going to the Board of Appeals for a variance.

•Approved a property tax exemption for nonprofit swim clubs whose members say their survival is threatened by steep rises in their property assessments and, in some cases, declining memberships as more families cannot afford the fees.

Tax credits

On Monday county officials said as many as 30,000 taxpayers could be eligible for a Homeowners Property Tax Credit, which could ease the burden on homeowners whose property values have risen faster than their incomes.

To be eligible, a taxpayer's household income must not exceed \$60,000 a year and assets, excluding the home and retirement accounts, must be less than \$200,000.

Last year (when the income limit was \$55,000) about 5,100 taxpayers claimed the credit, which averaged almost \$900.

This year the county portion of the credit is expected to average about \$750, but the total credit is set to increase with a greater share coming from the state.

On Tuesday the council introduced a bill that would automatically give residents who are 70 or older an additional credit equal to 25 percent of the Homeowners Property Tax Credit.

The council is set to meet again Aug. 1 before taking its late summer recess through Sept. 18.